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IDENTIFYING GRAVESTONE

CARVERS

IN THE NEW YORK AREA



GRAVESTONES are not only American's earliest sculpture, ranking with painting, and the crafting of silver, furniture, glass, pottery, quilts, etc. as subjects of study, they are also important records for study in sociology, history, religion, archaeology, and art history.

THEY ARE, IN FACT, THE ONLY ARTIFACTS which are all dated and survive for the most part in their original locations. No other body of art work offers a primary information source of this kind.

THE CARVERS

The John Stevens Workshop. For over three generations, a highly gifted Newport, Rhode Island family became so successful that the members could spend full time on cutting gravestones. John Stevens, Sr. came to America in his fifties. He was a stone mason by trade, a builder of chimneys, cellars, and foundations. It was after he moved to Newport, in 1706, that he began to cut gravestones as well. His work, his son and grandson's, gained such a reputation that their works were even shipped across the Connecticut Bay. As a result they can be found all over Long Island.

This soul effigy is copied from one of John Stevens, II, stones which was found on Shelter Island. John II took over the Steven's shop in 1736, developing a more sophisticated style than his father's. Demand for Stevens work increased.



The Abigail Otis stone shows the soft, Roman-influenced hair and upswept bi-level wings that became the trademark of John Stevens, III. Of the three he had the most artistic aspirations. John III, was influenced in his work by the neo-classic artwork imported after about 1769. His images were frequently dressed in togas and had their hair combed forward like Roman portraits. Unlike his father

and grandfather, his portraits faced three-quarters instead of straight front. The cutting is generally shallow but the faces are full enough to allow them individual expression. This signed stone seems to contain a self-portrait at the bottom Old Churchyard, Storrs, Ct.



John Zuricher Workshop. One of the first identified New York cutters of New York City was Zuricher, known to have been active from 1749 to 1778. His soul effigies have thick eyebrows and dipping chins and humorous, rounded pudgy cheeks (a feature which makes them extremely difficult to rub well). His wings tend to arch very high and the feathers are separated by half-moon cuts. His soul effigies are usually crowned but in this one element, he uses a great deal of variation.

The Price Workshop. This was one of the most successful of the second-half of the 18th century. Ebenezer Price was born in 1728 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He employed many apprentices who imitated his style very carefully and the results can be found all over our area. He tended to favor floral decorations and shells in addition to the much desired soul-effigy. On simple stones for Ryers family members found in Moravian Cemetery, Staten Island, N.Y. with pride.

Henry Osborne. Osborne is another local cutter whose work appears around New York and New Jersey. He favored stylized floral decorations, liking tulips most of all perhaps, in honor of the Dutch national flower.

Thomas Brown. The most unusual stylist to be seen in the greater New York area is Brown, who produced very sophisticated,

Renaissance sculptures of delicately etched cherubs with closed eyes, pursed lips, and soft, baby fine locks. His mastery of technique meant that he was certainly trained superbly to carry out this extremely fine chiseling. Not much is known about Brown at this time, but having seen his work once, it is impossible to miss when spotted somewhere else.



Osborne



Zuricher

LETTERING

How did colonial cutters develop their beautiful lettering styles? There were few buildings with masonry decoration to follow in the colonies, and these folk lived far away from the inspiration to be derived from the magnificent models to be found in Europe. Basically, they seem to have picked up the foundation of their lettering styles from their school books, for the most part imported from England. (It took almost 80 years for the indigenous printing industry to develop.) Literacy was regarded as a high priority in the colonies, and every town with at least 100 families was required by law to provide at least some primitive reading, writing, and arithmetic for its children.

According to type historian, Frederic W. Goudy, the type design for all the Romance languages was developed out of the capital letters from the Roman monuments. These ancient arches and commemorative sculptures lay all around the Italian type founders to use as their models. And these models were created by skilled craftsman who shaped their letters with varying widths, to most beautifully exemplify the written legend. Thus an ancient and respected form of sculpture had its influence seventeen centuries later on followers of its own trade.

Please take a moment to examine the distinctive alphabets on gravestones. Note their clarity and beautiful proportions.

Today, gravestones are mainly machine produced, and the choices of motifs few.



THE SYMBOLS

The symbols of the earlier gravestones serve many purposes. Since the graveyard was often located next to the church it served as a constant

reminder of the peril of the soul which did not live in Christian righteousness. The population was not very literate and the symbols therefore served as a form of shorthand which anyone could "read" and therefore they carried the message of the cutter to those who understood the letters below and those who did not. One of the most common symbols was the angel.

The Angel.

The ancient Mesopotamians created angels. They were convinced that a divine power beyond man communicated with us through "spirit messengers." And since then there doesn't seem to be one nationality that has not come up with a similar route to understanding the ineffable. The Buddhists, the Persians, the Old Testament Hebrews, all gave an independent life to winged spirits embodying our species' highest aspirations for itself.

It was therefore a natural step for the American Puritans, who strongly believed in an afterlife, to insist that those who died be undergoing a heavenly conversion into pure flying spirit. So we find angles, in some form or other, on most of the New England gravestones. Scholars have entitled these images "soul effigies," and it is by this word that we have identified them.

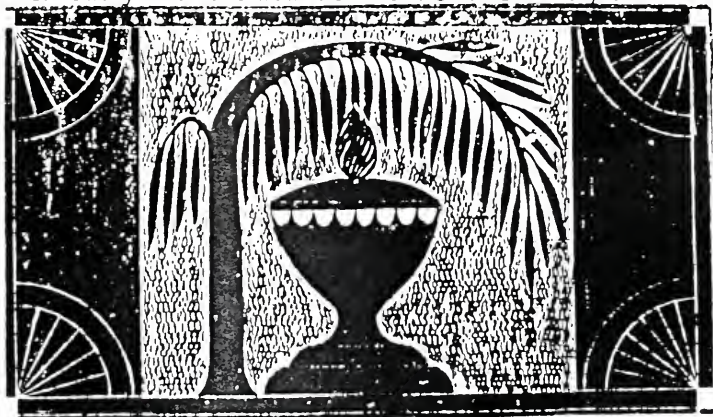
The Puritans seem to belong to the school that said "Those who you love, you chasten." And thus it was with the images on their burial markers. They had to attach the same grim quality to the angel that they attached to their daily lives. And thus it is we see many skulls cut into the stones, but note, these grim reapers almost always have wings. In the defense of the Puritans, they came from a culture which abounded in vans more grim images of those pangs of death. The brasses which they must have often seen in English cathedrals illustrate the terrors of the grave that rival Dante. However they made their own interpretations and family soon, pleasanter images began to be exhibited on the markers.

By Victorian times, sophisticated city dwellers had lost their taste for a heaven cluttered with airborne inhabitants. The small soul effigies disappeared and their place was taken by images of classical urns and broken willow trees. In the case of the very rich, however, monumental copies of Greek sculptures began to appear, looking very much like wilted Victories of Samathrace. This type of sculpture abounds in showplaces like Green-Wood Cemetery.

One image of human dimension remained. One is moved constantly in Victorian cemeteries by the figures of tiny lambs, sculptured in the rounds, which most often mark the grave of young children. In the Christian conception, the child's soul is pure of sin and thus eligible for the accolade, a "lamb of God."

Richard Welch suggests that religious piety was never strong in New York, a city which was always more noted for the materialism of its society. The Puritan symbols were followed only as long as some residual feelings about resurrection remained. When attitudes toward death changed to a more romantic view, the gravestone symbol which stressed retribution was discarded. Somewhere between 1795 and 1805 an abrupt change appears in the shape of the markers themselves. The triple-curved tympanums give way to the flat squared-off rectangle Victorians preferred.

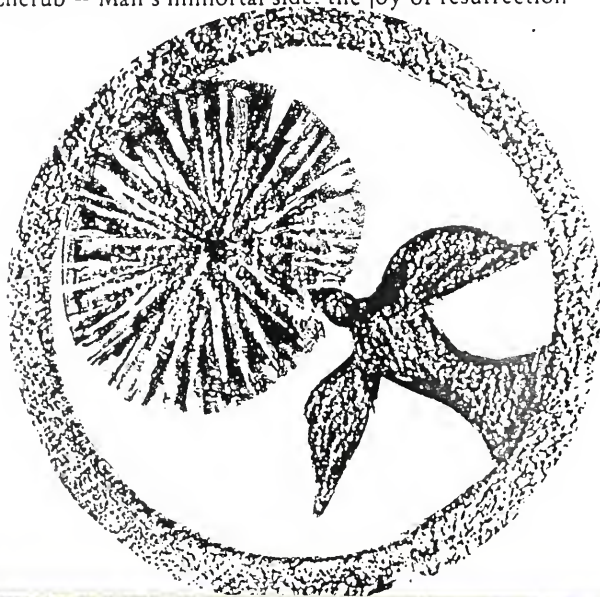
Within a short time, the "garden cemetery movement" based on concepts expressed by the English poets, replaced the charming old churchyards. Sadly with the abandonment of this "lively belief in



resurrection," also disappeared the distinctively American folk-carvers

A Short Glossary of Symbols

- Angels — Symbolize the heavenly host, and are often seen leading the soul toward heaven
- Architectural symbols — Death is a gateway to heaven; and an arch thus suggests the passageway through which the soul will travel
- Arrows — The Dart of Death
- Bibles — The Word through which one gains revelation
- Cocks and peacocks — The soul awakening to repentance
- Compass with a 'v' — The deceased was a member of the Society of Freemasons
- Crossbones — Show life's brevity
- Crown — A crown of righteousness
- Dove — A symbol of Christian devotion
- Hands open, with touching thumbs — the deceased was a member of the priestly line (only on Jewish stones)
- Heart — A symbol of the soul in heavenly bliss
- Hourglass — Represented the swift passage of time
- Lamb (on top of a stone) — A child is interred. Literally a "Lamb of God."
- Lamb as part of a design — The soul is a "Lamb of God."
- Mermaids — Symbol of the half-man-half-God nature of Jesus
- Rosette — A soul effigy
- Rising sun — Resurrection
- Torch — Resurrection
- Tree (an oak or apple) — The Tree of Life (only on Jewish stones)
- Trumpet — The sign of resurrection
- Urn — It contains the human remains from which the soul rises to heaven
- Willow — Mourning for the loss of earthly life
- Winged Cherub — Man's immortal side, the joy of resurrection



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